

# First documented record of Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps* from Nepal

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Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps* is included on the Nepal list on the basis of a sighting by R. L. Fleming and H. Gilston in 1975 that was published without further documentation (Fleming *et al.* 1976). Here we present details of the second record and first documented sighting of the species in Nepal (see also Tebb *et al.* 2002). We also review previous records from east of the normal wintering range, where the species is unaccountably rare.

Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (26°34'–26°45'N 80°55'–87°05'E; altitude 65 m) is part of the floodplain of the Koshi River in the south-eastern lowlands of Nepal. The habitats of the reserve edge are primarily small patches of grasslands with scattered pools and occasional areas of degraded riverine forest. On the morning of 18 February 2002, we observed a flock of about fifty buntings *Emberiza* spp. in seeding grass close to the eastern embankment. The majority of the birds were Yellow-breasted Buntings *E. aureola*, the commonest wintering bunting in the reserve (Baral 2000). A male and female Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala* and two Black-faced Buntings *E. spodocephala* were also present. Both of these species are also known to winter in Koshi (Baral 2000). After a while our attention was caught by another bird in the flock, the most obvious feature of which was the chestnut head and breast. It was observed carefully for 10–15 minutes, after which the flock moved out of view.

The following description is based on notes and sketches made at the time. The bird, obviously a bunting, was noticeably larger than the accompanying Yellow-breasted and Black-faced Buntings but somewhat smaller than Black-headed Bunting. The short, conical bill appeared pale grey. The forehead, ear-coverts, lores, throat and upper breast were bright chestnut and many feathers showed prominent white edges, suggesting that the bird had moulted relatively recently. A narrow eye-ring was visible. The crown was dull yellowish-green and the nape and mantle were olive-green with some faint darker streaks. The sides of the neck were bright yellow. There was a sharp cut-off between the chestnut upper breast and the bright yellow lower breast and belly. The undertail-coverts were yellow. The lesser coverts were yellowish and the median coverts appeared black with prominent pale edges, forming an obvious wing-bar. The greater coverts and tertials were brownish with pale edges and the primaries appeared dark brown on the perched bird. The wings were frequently obscured by grass, so the extent of the primary projection could not be judged with certainty. The rump was not seen clearly. The tail looked long and uniformly brown with no white visible on the outer feathers. The legs were pale. Throughout the period of observation the bird was not heard to call. Unlike the other species present it did not

perch in the open but remained relatively low in the grass.

All parts of the description are consistent with the identification as an adult male Red-headed Bunting in fresh plumage (e.g. Byers *et al.* 1995). All other bunting species can safely be eliminated. Chestnut Bunting *E. rutila* is slightly similar, but males show a complete chestnut head and upperparts, including wing-coverts. The main confusion species is Black-headed Bunting: females and immatures of the two species are difficult to separate in the field (Shirihai and Gantlett 1993), but identification of adult males is straightforward. A complication is that Red-headed and Black-headed Buntings are known to hybridise in their area of overlap south of the Caspian Sea (Haffer 1977). The possibility of hybrids can lead to identification difficulties. However, hybrid males invariably show a variety of characters intermediate between the two species, most typically in their head patterns. Hybrids most similar to Red-headed Bunting normally have some rufous on the mantle or some black in the head pattern (Byers *et al.* 1995). The bird we observed showed neither of these field marks so we are confident that it was a pure Red-headed Bunting. The record has been accepted by the Nepal Rare Birds Committee.

The Red-headed Bunting breeds in an area bounded by the lower Ural River, the southern Altai mountains, western Xinjiang and north-eastern Iran (Byers *et al.* 1995). It migrates through Pakistan and winters almost exclusively in India, where it is found from Gujarat and southern Rajasthan east to western Madhya Pradesh and south to northern Karnataka and north-west Andhra Pradesh (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Rashid (1967) mentions the species as a winter visitor to the north-western and western districts of Bangladesh and possibly also to south-central Bangladesh, but there have been no recent records from the country (Harvey 1990, Thompson *et al.* 1993, Thompson and Johnson 2003). In view of the rapid north-west expansion of the species's breeding range in Kazakhstan in the twentieth century (Korelov *et al.* 1974), a contraction of the wintering range would seem highly unlikely, so Rashid's statement should be interpreted with caution. We are unaware of any other published references to the species in Bangladesh.

A true understanding of the Red-headed Bunting's movements is complicated by the uncertainty surrounding the origin of vagrant individuals. The species is frequently observed in Europe but sightings are generally thought to relate to escapes, as Red-headed Buntings are popularly kept in captivity (Alström *et al.* 1991, Clement and Gantlett 1993). There are records from the nineteenth century, before the species was widely imported, and some authors conclude that these and at least some of the subsequent observations can probably be attributed to

vagrants (Williamson 1953, Dubois and Yésou 1992, Meininger 1996, Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer 1997). Others believe that even the early records are not above suspicion and that all records may relate to escaped birds, despite the apparently seasonal pattern of their occurrence at well-watched 'migration points' (Ferguson-Lees 1967, Hudson 1967, see also Osborn and Harvey 1993).

Sightings of Red-headed Buntings in Asia east of the regular wintering areas are highly unusual. There are no definite records from Hong Kong, although four Red-headed/Black-headed Buntings in October 1992 were probably of this species (Hale 1993). Subsequent sightings from Hong Kong have either been of Black-headed Buntings (Leader 1996) or have not been identified to species (Leader 1996, Carey *et al.* 1998, Carey *et al.* 1999). Records of Red-headed Bunting from Japan are thought to be of escapes (Brazil 1991) but birds recorded in Tibet (Ludlow 1944) and China (Cheng 1987) may have been genuine vagrants, although the possibility of escapes is difficult to eliminate for certain. The only previous record from Nepal was of a male seen 180 m above sea level in tamarisk along the Narayani River, Royal Chitwan National Park on 15 April 1975 (Fleming *et al.* 1976). In this case the observation followed three days of continuous strong westerly winds and it is likely that the bird was a wind-blown vagrant.

Subsequent to our observation, a pair of Red-headed Buntings was seen in the grasslands of Koshi Camp, east of Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, on several dates in February 2002 (Giri and Choudhary 2002). The winter of 2001–2002 thus seems to have produced a minor influx of this extremely rare vagrant to Nepal. Such occurrences are not unknown: Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer (1997) indicate that small influxes to western Europe may have taken place in 1879 and in 1930. However, these and the records in Nepal in 2002 conceivably could have stemmed from escapes from consignments of cagebirds, as occurred, for example, in England in 1951 (Anon. 1952).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For assistance with obtaining literature we are extremely grateful to Hans-Martin Berg of the Vogelsammlung at the Natural History Museum in Vienna, to Mike Wilson at the Alexander Library, Oxford and to Peter Los (Zwolle, Netherlands). We should also like to thank Monirul Khan of the Wildlife Research Group, Dept. of Anatomy, Cambridge for his helpful comments on the status of Red-headed Bunting in Bangladesh.

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